

Medication Errors Fly Under Radar, Even as Leading Cause of Death

Tips can keep patients safe

Kansas City, Mo. - April 2008 - Imagine if a jetliner carrying an average of 78 passengers crashed every month for a year, and everyone on board each time was killed. Some people would stop flying. Activists would call for in-depth investigations and new safety measures. The number of air-born fatalities would be front-page news.

So why do medical errors continue to fly under the radar? Medical errors is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, claiming more lives each year than motor vehicle accidents, breast cancer or AIDS. The largest category of mistakes is medication errors.

According to a 2000 Institute of Medicine report, medication errors cause as many as 98,000 deaths each year. More recent data from HealthGrades, a leading healthcare ratings company, puts the annual death toll from medication errors much higher at 284,798. Industry analysts say both estimates are low, since there is no national mandatory reporting system to track errors. Less than half of the United States require doctors and healthcare professionals to report mistakes, and even when statewide mandatory reporting systems are in place, the data is not always readily available to the general public.

Douglas R. Horn, founder of the Horn Law Firm in Independence, Mo., just outside of Kansas City, Mo., has seen the effects of such mistakes first-hand through his work on behalf of medication error victims. Founded in 1990, Horn's practice is increasingly comprised of complex cases involving drug errors.

Prior to opening Horn Law, Horn represented large corporations, healthcare providers and insurance companies. His experience on the "other side" of cases uniquely prepared him to represent plaintiffs and help them recover full and fair compensation for their injuries.

Horn's background supports other expert opinions that the most common medication and prescribing errors include:

- Confusing similar drug names
- Administering the wrong dosage
- Failing to recognize a patient's history of allergies
- Miscommunication between doctors and pharmacists caused by illegible handwriting or abbreviation misinterpretation
- Failing to check patient identification to ensure a drug is administered to the intended patient

In the majority of cases, medication errors involve preventable human errors caused by:

- Health care practitioner mistakes - Nurses sometimes fail to ensure that the right patient receives the right drug in the correct dosage
- Environmental distractions - increasing consumer demand, work

interruptions such as ringing telephones and high noise levels, esp. in big-box pharmacies

- Staffing issues - too few employees who are improperly trained
- Procedural breakdowns - policies, procedures and protocols designed to enhance safety are not followed

Horn recommends that patients or a trusted relative ask the following questions to help avoid medication errors:

1. What are the names of the medications being dispensed?
2. Why is a particular medication being prescribed?
3. How long will the medication need to be taken?
4. How will the new medication interact with my other medications?
5. What are the side effects of this medication?

"If a healthcare worker caring for a patient cannot answer these questions, that's a red flag that the medications should be reviewed by the prescribing doctor," said Horn.

About Horn Law

Horn Law has been helping victims of serious personal injury recover full and fair compensation for their injuries since 1990. Because the firm concentrates its practice in the area of injury law, Horn Law medication error attorneys can devote unprecedented personal attention and resources to each client. Clients also benefit from Horn Law professionals' combined 20 years of experience. Horn is a member of the Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association, the Missouri Association of Trial Attorneys and the American Association of Justice.